



Aruban labor groups protest at the Parliament offices

This past Tuesday afternoon a number of labor leaders and citizens gathered in front of the government offices in the late afternoon to protest peacefully the increases passed by Parliament in regards to the AZV national health plan. The week before, various group leaders, including Paul van Niel, President of OPPA, the organization of retired civil service workers met to discuss a plan of action, and create a manifest in response to the announced increases in the premium and additional surtaxes that will be charged for doctor visits and prescriptions. Before this final vote of Parliament, a number of the organizations had made recommendations for helping to alleviate the financial situation without increasing the premiums.

Approximately 125 individuals, including Anselmo Pontilius, head of the FTA, Aruba's union of workers, and Rudy Geerman, head of SEPA, gathered in front of the harbor across from the government offices.

Along with Clifford Heliger, Vice-President of SIWA, they address the group, consisting mainly of retired individuals on fixed incomes, and a number of cab drivers, while waiting for Prime Minister Nelson Oduber and Minister of Health Booshi Wever to come out to receive their manifest.

The first article on the manifest is the complaint of the twenty-six million florin deficit carried by the AZV, and the reasons for it. Prime Minister Oduber, in receiving the manifest from Rudy Geerman claimed that "from the onset they knew the AZV would have difficulties and run at a deficit, but the government cannot budget the money to cover it."

According to Clifford Heyliger, Minister Oduber also replied to the request by labor leaders for a meeting on the December 30 to discuss the issues by saying "who are you to set my agenda?" Mr. Heyliger feels that as Prime Minister, it is Nelson Oduber's obligation to listen to his people, and "his people are not happy, things are not in order" expressed Mr. Heliger, "if you are the Prime Minister and you care about your country, you will make time. It was disrespectful of him to say that."

Since nearly its inception, the AZV national health plan has been under fire, and most labor leaders feel that there are alternatives to increasing the premiums, and have presented plans to the government to make the changes that will make it a more viable system without penalizing the taxpayers.

"Trade Union leaders looked to organizing this peaceful protest the moment Parliament took the decision to increase the premium of our health insurance plan," stated FTA leader Anselmo Pontilius. "We are not against it just to be against it, we are already paying 1%, but we believe there are other channels from where they can cover the existing deficit. We requested the opportunity to sit down with the government and analyze from which channels we can bring in the money without affecting the workers. The increase requires them to pay 1.6%, we are already paying 1%, and the independent workers, such as taxi drivers will be paying 9.5%. Pensioned people are here because they are now living on their pension, they worked hard for their pension, and now they must pay full premium." Normally employers pay the lion's share of the health insurance premium, but for retirees, they must take on the full burden.

Mr. Pontilius continued to say that another reason for the protest was to show that "this is a community, and we are a democracy whereby we have the opportunity to protest when we don't agree with a decision of Parliament. In particular, in this case, where they had an opportunity to analyze what we had brought forward, and they didn't take the time to consider it."

Prime Minister Oduber accepted the manifest at the door of the government offices along with Minister of Health, Booshi Wever. During the Prime Minister's address to the gathering he stated the deficit "is not a problem for us, (the government) it is a problem for you. For a meeting on the 30th, I cannot answer you right now. In any case, we will keep in account the manifest, and any union that is part of our democracy. Remember that a government has the legitimate right to make its decisions based on situations that we think that we have a responsibility to with which we must comply. I want to congratulate you all on an orderly and respectful way you have gathered and demonstrated for your rights. One thing I do want to say, the problem, it isn't from now, but previous governments, as I have said in the first months since this government came in, we wouldn't have the money to fill the deficit each year, the government has other obligations. It is erroneous thinking and an erroneous impression the thirty million to cover the deficit is there. It is not so, each time we have had to take the funds from somewhere else. The present government changed the structure of AZV from a board of overseers to board of commissioners, and we gave unions who represent the workers and the owners of companies, in a sense they became the "owners" of AZV. That is the bottom line, that every time there is a more direct participation so you should understand the situation that AZV is in. From the first day we knew it would be a challenge, how to keep complying with it and with a basic minimum package that we are obligated to give the community."

